

October 22, 2009 - Appropriator Expects Defense Bill to Pay for 10 More C-17s

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Appropriator expects Defense bill to pay for 10 more C-17s

By Megan Scully

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House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman John Murtha, D-Pa., said Wednesday that he expects the fiscal 2010 Defense spending bill will include funding to buy about 10 C-17 Globemaster III cargo planes, but signaled he is worried about the \$250 million price tag for each aircraft.

Before he signs off on the additional planes, Murtha said he wants Boeing Co., the plane's maker, to give the government a price more comparable to the roughly \$200 million per plane the government paid as part of the last multiyear procurement deal for C-17s, which ended in 2007.

The House-passed Defense Appropriations bill included \$674 million to buy three C-17s, or \$225 million per plane. The Senate version added \$2.5 billion for 10 planes.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates and other senior administration officials have said repeatedly that the current plan for 205 C-17s, when combined with the existing fleet of larger C-5 Galaxy aircraft, is

enough to meet the military's airlift needs.

In a letter to appropriators last week, Office of Management and Budget Director Peter R. Orszag estimated that buying 10 more C-17s would cost \$100 million in operations and maintenance costs annually -- in addition to the \$2.5 billion required to purchase them.

"Procuring additional C-17s is an inefficient use of critical defense resources," he wrote.

But the aircraft program, which employs more than 30,000 people in 43 states, has a legion of supporters on Capitol Hill who do not want to see the plane's production lines stopped.

Meanwhile, Murtha said there still has been no decision by House and Senate conferees on whether to include funding for the problem-plagued VH-71 presidential helicopter program, which the administration has sought to cancel because of soaring costs and schedule delays.

Defying a veto threat from the White House, the House passed a bill with an added \$400 million to make five initial "Increment 1" helicopters operational, reflecting Murtha's concerns that the military already had invested \$3.2 billion in the program.

The Senate bill included only the funds requested to cancel the program.

In a "heartburn" letter to appropriators Oct. 14, Gates said he would personally recommend the president veto the defense bill if it includes funds to continue the VH-71 program. Making the five aircraft operational, he said, would cost an additional \$2 billion -- and the helicopters would still not meet full operational requirements.

Undeterred, Murtha is still speaking with the administration about the issue. "We're still negotiating, trying to convince them," he said.

In another move the Pentagon strongly opposes, conferees are expected to include funding in the bill to keep alive the second engine program for the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, Murtha said. The House bill includes \$560 million for the engine, while the Senate bill contained no funding, effectively allowing the administration to terminate the program.

The White House has said it would veto the bill if officials determine that funding the alternate engine would seriously disrupt the overall F-35 program.

Despite some lingering issues that still must be resolved, Murtha said the bill would be ready for a final vote as early as next week.

But House leaders still are weighing whether to attach to the must-pass measure unrelated legislation, such as a Washington, D.C., voting rights bill or legislation to raise the national debt limit.

The bill also could become the vehicle for an omnibus fiscal 2010 spending bill or a continuing resolution that would keep the government operating beyond the end of November.

House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee ranking member C.W. (Bill) Young, R-Fla., said he has put Democrats "on notice" not to add contentious and unrelated legislation to the spending bill.

But Young said he might support the addition of a needed continuing resolution, depending on what is included in the CR.

Young added that he believes an omnibus bill -- which could include the defense bill -- likely will be necessary. To date only four of the 12 annual spending bills have been sent to the president for his signature.

House Transportation-HUD Appropriations Subcommittee

Chairman John Olver, D-Mass., agreed that an omnibus is likely in the offing.

Humberto Sanchez contributed to this report.